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Kennecott expansion clears another Utah hurdle

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The state signed off Monday on another environmental permit for Kennecott, moving the copper giant closer to expanding its Bingham Canyon mine and angering clean-air advocates worried about added pollution.

"We do not support any expansion of Kennecott operations without substantial air-pollution mitigation investments," said Cherise Udell, co-founder of Utah Moms for Clean Air. "We are standing up for what's right and what's ethical."

But Bryce Bird, director of the Utah Division of Air Quality, said the company's plans would not "result in adverse air-quality impacts" and would, in fact, reduce pollution.

Bird noted Kennecott would face, under its PM10 permit for the mine, added dust controls, more pollution monitoring and new emission caps under the new permit, which would allow the company to remove more copper, gold, silver and molybdenum by extending the mine's life to 2028.

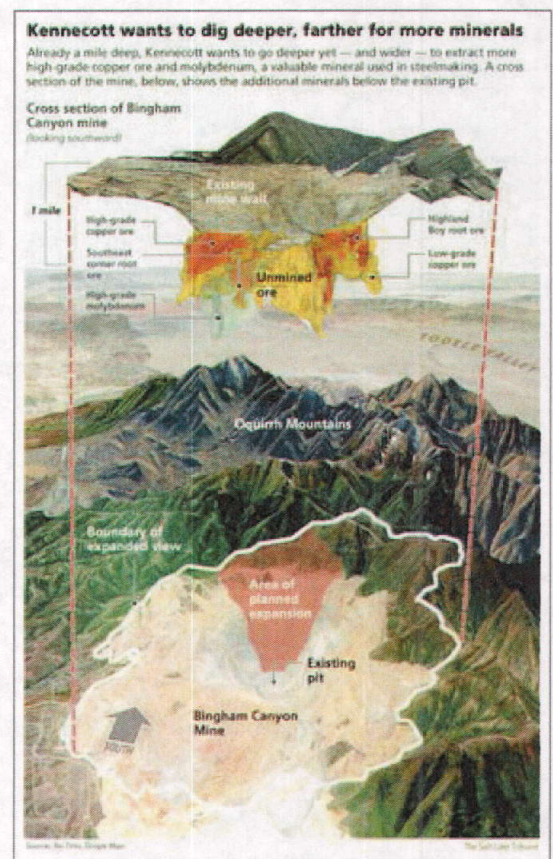
"After extensive evaluation, we have determined that the permit conditions are consistent with state and federal standards established for air-quality permits," Bird said in a news release. "With the conditions in the approval order, the expanded operations do not cause air quality to exceed the federal standards and are protective of health and the environment."

The updated permit would allow Kennecott to excavate about 260 million tons annually, compared with 197 million tons currently allowed for dust emissions known as PM10.

The approval comes after nearly 11 months, two public hearings and a flurry of protests by clean-air activists. Bird credited that public input for triggering some of the enhanced air-quality controls the new permit imposes on Kennecott.

But Terry Marasco, of the Utah Clean Air Alliance, said air-quality officials had shut out the advocates in the end.

"They reach out to us," he said, "but don't listen."



In particular, Marasco said, Bird's agency had ignored a request to resolve broader problems with PM10 before finalizing this latest permit.

Last month, Utah's Air Quality Board voted 5-4 to approve a controversial plan to lift the cap on PM10 emissions statewide to accommodate Kennecott's so-called Cornerstone expansion. The panel did so even though the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said the project might not be "approvable" because of PM10 pollution.

Marasco argues the state should not have approved the mine's PM10 increase until the disagreement with EPA was settled and data proved the expansion wouldn't mean a pollution spike.

This new permit approval, he said, is "just the wrong way to go about it."

The clean-air advocate also said alliance members will huddle soon to decide if member organizations will challenge one or more of the permit updates.

Meanwhile, Chris Kaiser, who oversees environmental rules for Kennecott, called the newly updated permit — one of more than two dozen approvals needed to move forward with Cornerstone — the result of a "thorough review." It clears the way, he said, for Kennecott's parent company, Rio Tinto, to focus on updating yet another permit that it maintains would result in lower overall emissions — one that would allow the mining giant to convert three of four on-site power plants from coal to natural gas. The overhaul, Kaiser said, would reduce the plants' allowable emissions by 90 percent.

This latest permit, Kaiser said, "lays the groundwork for repowering our power plant, which is a major emissions reduction."

In addition, the company recently submitted a request that would allow it to expand its tailings pond eastward to contain more mining waste.

Bird said air-quality laws, not economic factors, were part of his agency's decision-making. He pointed to division calculations that showed virtually all types of monitored air pollutants would decrease under Kennecott's expansion — even if all of the pollution from the expanded pit drifted into the air outside the mine.

Dust, for instance, would drop from 5,901 tons per year to 4,118 tons per year with the expansion, thanks to a variety of emission-cutting practices and technologies that Kennecott has pledged, according to the state's analysis.

But clean-air advocates aren't buying it.

Udell, of Utah Moms for Clean Air, said her group is poised to ask residents to donate their lungs when they die for research of Kennecott pollution. She said the idea is to look for chemical markers that lead back to emissions from mining operations.

"DAQ's declared mission is to 'safeguard human health and quality of life by protecting and enhancing the environment,' Udell said. "Nowhere does DAQ's mission state 'and safeguard the needs of Utah's industrial polluters,' and yet that appears to be their priority."

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More mining, less pollution?

Kennecott and the Utah Division of Air Quality predict an overall reduction in air pollution even though the mining company will be moving more rock and processing more ore.

DAQ scientists compared current pollution allowances of 197 million tons of mining materials moved per year with the plan to move 260 million tons under the expansion, factoring in technology and process improvements the company plans.

Here are the projected differences:

Dust (PM10) • Reduced by 1,783.34 tons per year

Fine-particle pollution (PM2.5) • Reduced by 472.5 tons per year

Sulfur dioxide • Reduced by 90.44 tons per year

Nitrogen oxides • Reduced by 1,416.64 tons per year

Carbon monoxide • Reduced by 2,679.27 tons per year

Volatile organic compounds (a kind of pollution booster) • Reduced by 360.68 tons per year

Hazardous air pollutants • Increased by 0.40 ton per year

For more details, go to <http://1.usa.gov/jGpEVo>

Source: Utah Division of Air Quality

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